

KPCC-FM (NPR)
Larry Mantle's Air Talk
December 01, 2005 (10:00 AM - 11:00 AM)

LARRY MANTLE, host:

We begin today with a tentative agreement that has been reached between Los Angeles City and Los Angeles World Airports, which operates Los Angeles International, as well as the county of Los Angeles and cities that neighbor LAX. This over a lawsuit that had been filed to try and block implementation of former Los Angeles Mayor Jim Hahn's plan to modernize LAX and expand its capacity.

* * *

MANTLE: This is AIR TALK. I'm Larry Mantle. Good morning, glad to have you with us as we talk about the tentative pact reached between Los Angeles, its World Airport Authority and neighboring cities to LAX, as well as the County of Los Angeles.

It throws out a significant portion of the expansion plan for LAX that had originally been voted on by the LA City Council. Much of it had been approved; other parts had gotten yellow lights that would be considered in the future, including the controversial Manchester Square check-in facility. That now appears to be dead.

It appears that LAX can move forward with reconfiguring its southern-most runway to try and please the Federal Aviation Administration, which has serious safety concerns about how close those runways are together. Also, it allows the Tom Bradley International Terminal to be updated and modernized, which I don't think has been done until—since the 1984 LA Olympics.

To talk with us a bit about the settlement, as well as some of its details, is the mayor of El Segundo, Kelly McDowell. Thank you for being with us on AIR TALK.

Mr. KELLY McDOWELL (Mayor, El Segundo): Thank you, Larry. My pleasure.

MANTLE: Well, what were the most important aspects of this settlement to you and your constituents in El Segundo?

Mr. McDOWELL: First and foremost, and not just for us but for all the petitioners and really the region, I think that the emphasis in the settlement on regionalism, both through gate restraints, as Representative Harman mentioned, and also through Los Angeles' agreement to undertake some specific measures, planning and implementation, to disburse air traffic throughout southern California, is the one big overriding accomplishment of this agreement, and the one that will survive for years to come.

Additionally, we've achieved some significant litigation measures on the south runway project, which has now become a national security priority through the FAA, we've been promised funding by LAWA to insulate every eligible house in the city of El Segundo on an accelerated basis without home owners having to give up noise easements in exchange for that. And we've gotten additional help on roadway improvements and other items from Los Angeles World Airports, as well. It's an extraordinary development.

MANTLE: And these yellow-lighted projects that appeared--they were probably dead but not definitively so. Does it look like they're all going to be dead at this point?

Mr. McDOWELL: I'm not sure you'll see them written out of the plan, but I strongly suspect that Los Angeles won't go forward with projects like the Ground Transportation Center. Now, of course, that's not El Segundo's decision, but we, of course, are stakeholders in the process.

This mayor of Los Angeles, Antonio Villaraigosa, has made his direction for the airport quite clear. And that direction is what got these talks started, along with the backing of people like Congresswoman Jane Harmon and Supervisor Don Knabe. And I think that Los Angeles World Airports, under Lydia Kennard's direction, understands the new course. We certainly do. I think that it's going to take on a different character.

MANTLE: That course toward regionalism that you describe is probably the most important part of this agreement. That requires that airports in surrounding communities, like John Wayne Orange County Airport, Burbank Airport, that they are going to be able to take on more capacity. Obviously, El Toro was off the table as an airport. I don't know whether the high desert becomes more of a factor, but you think it's realistic that these suburban airports are going to be able or willing to take on more capacity?

Mr. McDOWELL: I do, indeed. We estimate, and the Southern California Association of Government's estimates, that over the coming years 80 percent of the new population growth and new jobs growth is going to occur to the east of the coastal area where LAX is located, and the regional traffic that that generates, both cargo and passenger, is going to be more than significant. And interestingly, I think that the agency that will benefit the most from regional growth and regional dispersion of air traffic is Los Angeles World Airports, because they are poised to grow Ontario, they are poised to grow Palmdale, and the other regional airports in the region will also foster that growth.

MANTLE: Mark Pisano joining us from the Southern California Association of Governments, where he is executive director.

Thanks for joining us again on AIR TALK.

Mr. MARK PISANO (Executive Director, Southern California Association of Governments): Larry, it's always a pleasure being with you.

MANTLE: Do you agree with El Segundo Mayor McDowell that this regional approach to passenger growth at airports can be accomplished?

Mr. PISANO: Yes. And let me explain why. The region adopted this policy almost ten years ago that we would decentralize aviation and that we would keep LAX as an airport to its current operational capacity, 78 million passengers, and distribute passengers throughout the region.

In order for that to occur, we feel that the most important next step is for the City of Los Angeles to charge its airport commission, LAWA, with the charge to act as a regional operator, in that it has the three airports that we feel will be the keystone of a regional system, namely LAX, which is the cornerstone of the three, Ontario and Palmdale, as Mayor McDowell stated. And that they should operate those airports as an integrated system with an integrated ground access system.

The most significant issue that the region faces is that the people who travel, they have industries and incomes, are on the western part of the region, and we think that without ground access, and that's why we fight improving ground access to Ontario and Palmdale, as the cornerstone of getting increased passenger service, that coupled with the growth that the Mayor talked about, we feel that it's totally feasible and it's desirable, and the region's growth pattern has been established in our last growth plan to reflect that decision.

MANTLE: Now, I understand the population growth to the east as well as to the north, and that that's going to provide a greater pool of potential passengers for those two other LAWA airports.

But you still have so much demand coming out of the San Fernando Valley, out of the west side and central Los Angeles, and out of Orange County, if John Wayne doesn't expand, if Burbank doesn't expand, and obviously residents there are dead set against that happening at both locations, and if LAX is capped on its

growth, you really think that there are going to be enough people willing to take ground transportation out to the farther flung airports?

Mr. PISANO: Larry, I think you cited the critical issue for the region, the decentralized aviation services. And that is, we have to have high-speed access to these airports.

To that effect, for the last ten years, we have been developing, and we feel it is feasible and the City of Los Angeles and the City of Ontario are currently working on a joint feasibility study of putting a high-speed system between the western part of LA County and Ontario airport as a starter line. That particular investment is going to be absolutely critical, otherwise the passengers are going to push on the local airports of Long Beach, John Wayne, Burbank.

Now, both Los Angeles World Airport, acting as a regional airport system and a ground access system, will stop this problem. The work that we've been doing on the feasibility and on our business plan indicates that it's totally within the market feasibility to build such a system. And that couples commuter traffic with airport traffic, with the development of activities around airports. We're convinced that we can make the regional system work.

We adopted this plan ten years ago, and we haven't changed it because there's been no--we've seen no technical reason not to do it.

MANTLE: All right. We thank you, Mark Pisano, executive director of the Southern California Association of Governments for joining us again on AIR TALK. We appreciate it very much.

Mr. PISANO: Thank you, Larry.

LARRY: And Kelly McDowell, mayor of El Segundo, thank you for being with us. Finally, do you anticipate all the parties who have been involved with this that they're elected bodies, the council, board of supervisors, etc., that everyone will approve this?

Mr. McDOWELL: I think that my city council, my colleagues, as well as the other legislative bodies, will see the good in this agreement. Everybody gave up a little, but everybody gained a heck of a lot.

MANTLE: Thank you very much, Mayor McDowell from El Segundo. We appreciate your joining us. Thanks.

Mr. McDOWELL: Thanks so much, Larry.